Fall 2000

Beyond Start-Up

Real Answers for Established Education Programs

Amy Blake, consultant to LEARNS at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

You made it through last year—you recruited volunteers, trained members, and held a recognition event to thank all for their time and commitment; members and volunteers tutored students of all ages and reported positive results. You made it through the year, and you got things done.

Now what?

The new program year is under way, and you want to do more—you want to get to that elusive next level. There are untapped resources in your community and under-used energy and skill in tutors. You wonder, "What have others done to unlock all that potential?"

This issue of *The Tutor* focuses on the challenges programs face as they enter a new year. How can they continuously improve to better serve students and communities? We asked veteran program directors and coordinators from all streams of service how they moved beyond the start-up phase, and guided partners, members, volunteers, and students to new levels of commitment and achievement. Their answers can help you take stock of assets, plan improvements, and make the coming year one of growth and success for everyone.

To find additional program ideas and best practices (or to contribute your own), go to the new Corporation for National Service resource—Epicenter—to find out what's working in national service programs: www.nationalservice.org/resources/epicenter/

LEARNS is a partnership of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the Bank Street College of Education. For literacy, tutoring, and mentoring projects, LEARNS provides training and technical assistance. Call to find out how we can help you:

- locate resources
- connect with peers
- brainstorm solutions
- design and deliver training

Resources for new projects

We suggest the following free resources for national service staff beginning new literacy or tutoring projects:

Program Design and Development

Day One … in the Life of a Program Coordinator. Breaks down the tasks of beginning a volunteer tutor program, including identifying assets, defining the program, setting goals, relating to stakeholders, and recruiting volunteers. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Obtain a copy through the LEARNS project at 1-800-361-7890, or online at www.nwrel.org/learns.

Growing a Volunteer Tutor Program: Engaging Communities to Support Schools. Tells the story of a start-up year through the experience of program director Maria Martin and features guiding questions, common documents, journal entries, and e-mail exchanges. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. To order a copy, contact the National Service Resource Center at 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142.

Investing in Partnerships for Student Success. A guiding tool for the development and management of educational partnerships, detailing a no-frills continuous improvement process model. Order from the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, U.S. Department of Education, 1-800-USA-LEARN, www.pfie.ed.gov.

Principles and Key Components for High Quality America Reads National Service Program Initiatives. Includes general guidelines about integrating America Reads initiatives within national service programs and outlines standards for quality tutoring activities. Corporation for National Service. Available online through the National Service Resource Center, 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142, www.etr.org/nsrc.

Making an Impact on Out-of-School Time. Information about out-of-school time programs, national service support for these programs, and considerations for quality programming. National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Corporation for National Service. Available online through the National Service Resource Center, 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142, www.etr.org/nsrc.

Reading/Tutoring Training Resources

On the Road to Reading: A Guide for Community Partners. Derry Koralek, Ray C. Collins. Joint publication from the Corporation for National Service, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available through the National Service Resource Center, 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142, www.etr.org/nsrc.

Reading Helpers: A Handbook for Training Tutors. Tutoring strategies and training activities to prepare tutors to work with children from birth through third grade, a companion book for *On the Road to Reading* (above). Corporation for National Service. Available through the National Service Resource Center, 1-800-860-2684, ext. 142, www.etr.org/nsrc.

Web Sites

Check out these Web sites for online materials and links to the many other organizations and resources that support national service, volunteer, and literacy programs:

- Corporation for National Service at www.cns.gov. Provides state contacts and profiles of state programs, helpful background information, resources, and support links for AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve programs.

- LEARNS at www.nwrel.org/learns. Provides start-up resources; training activities, tutor session resources, and a calendar; an assessment and evaluation system; and *Tutor* newsletters on key program topics.

- National Service Resource Center at www.etr.org/nsrc. A national training and technical assistance resource for national service programs that provides a calendar of training opportunities, a lending library, a catalogue of resources, and many useful and online manuals and documents.

Where have you been?

But before finalizing plans for the upcoming year, take time to look back and reflect on past successes and challenges, expectations, and outcomes. Take 20 or 30 minutes to respond to the questions that follow. Jot down your thoughts and impressions. Reflecting now may help you make better decisions in the future.

Return to your original grant and stated goals for the past year to consider:

- How well did we meet our goals?
- What was our biggest success? What factors led to that success?
- What was our biggest challenge? How did we respond? What will we take away from that experience?
- What activities do volunteers/members and students tackle in their time together?
- Do tutors' activities align with our goals? Are there better ways to structure time and activities to increase impact on student achievement?
- How do tutors evaluate the quality of their student-tutor relationships? Are there new ways to enhance and support these relationships?
- If yours is a service-learning program, do service activities link successfully with students' academic goals?
- How well did we communicate with our point people at schools and hosting organizations? Did our system provide adequate and timely information exchange?
- How often, and in what ways, did we communicate with tutors? Was this enough? Did we talk about important issues at the right time?
- How did we show program impacts? What information have we not been able to obtain or report? Why?
- How did we survey important stakeholders (educators, volunteers, school principals, students, parents) to gauge their satisfaction and seek suggestions for improvement? Have we missed important stakeholders?
- On what topics, how frequently, and in what formats did we offer training or inservice for tutors? Did tutors report that they were prepared with a variety of strategies? What issues arose during the year that we could address with training or other support this year?
- How effective was our collaboration? What did each partner do to support and enhance collaboration with one another? How can we improve?
- Did our advisory group and tutors play important roles? How can these expand?
- How did we stretch ourselves this year? What was valuable about that experience?
- Given past experiences, where should we focus our energy this year? How can we focus on those objectives?

All stakeholders—teachers, tutors, students to name a few—need time to reflect on their past year's experience, too. And they provide valuable feedback and unique perspectives. Pose these questions to them, and use their responses to inform your objectives for the coming year.

Personal Reflection

Complete these sentences, and use the answers to set one or two realistic goals for yourself. Set yourself up for success by articulating a plan to get you from where you are now to where you want to be in, say, six months. For example, some days it seems you're on the telephone for hours, redirecting calls, tracking down paperwork, responding to inquiries. Meanwhile, the program newsletter remains unwritten. Consider blocking out an hour or two, delegating your responsibilities, and make a promise you will not (absolutely will not!) answer the phone. Use that quiet time to focus on an important project that's been on the back burner. (You can set aside time in the afternoon to make and return those calls you postponed or didn't take.)

I spend the majority of my time …

I would like to spend less time …

I would like to spend more time …

Steps I'll take to accomplish this …

"The compiled stories can go into a results packet that you give or send to volunteers, teachers, principals, legislators, etc.—if you're not doing a results packet, you should!"

in students that funders and other stakeholders need—and want—to know.

"We include in our statewide reports *Great Stories* submitted by each local sponsor," says Mary. "These narratives help bring the numbers to life by providing meaningful illustrations of students and volunteers—from reading improvement to special bonds that are formed."

Sitka Learn and Serve volunteers share their experiences at advisory committee meetings. "We also have volunteers and teachers write letters about their experiences," Bridgett says, "and we include those with our semiannual reports." Contributing stories connects participants to the program and expands stakeholders' understanding of the impact on students.

As Gail points out, stories also help the word about your program. "Invite your local newspaper (or anyone else who does newsletters or publications) to interview a special volunteer, teacher, student, or family for a human interest story. Most folks love to be in the paper, and the article will make for great portfolio documentation and public relations." *(Editors: Ask for prints of any newspaper pictures, and also take plenty of your own; great photos tell their own story.)*

To make telling these stories easier, Gail suggests creating a "testimonial form that asks each teacher to tell one special story. The compiled stories can go into a results packet that you give or send to volunteers, teachers, principals, legislators, etc.—if you're not doing a results packet, you should! And always invite teachers to Results and Planning meetings with funders, and give them an opportunity to tell their stories."

Think of stories as individual snapshots of the program's impact. "Believe it or not," Gail says, "touching stories sometimes follow a pattern." She advises to "watch for trends and incorporate them in your evaluation form." In that way, stories become data.

Enrichment

One of our partners wants volunteers for a reading enrichment program rather than one-to-one tutoring focused on performance. How can we create a meaningful and effective program focused on enriching students' appreciation of literature?

Enrichment activities (e.g., field trips, special projects, service-learning, creative arts activities) can provide valuable learning opportunities for students and tutors, and several coordinators find they give participants the chance to express their creativity in ways not previously possible. It's important, however, to help students and volunteers focus activities and draw links to literacy concepts and skills. "The trick for us," Nora says, "has been in structuring enrichment activities just as we would for reading tutoring. In other words, all the same rules apply: one-to-one or small group tutoring, a year-long experience, matching the same enrichment tutor with children throughout the year, and pre/post assessments."

Enrichment activities also open the door to experiential learning for students. Nora gives one example from Montana Campus Corps (MCC): "Children learning about multiculturalism will visit with a guest speaker from another country. After this, they read a story on the same theme. Then, they might end the theme by writing their own story or creating a recipe book."

David sees the freedom afforded by enrichment activities as an opportunity to create a student-centered program. "Ask students what they want," he suggests. "What would you like to read about? What fascinates you? Who would you most like to meet? If you could go anywhere, where would it be? Let the learners choose the topics, and have volunteers go along for the ride, as fellow adventurers who ask good questions."

Enrichment lets students expand their understanding—and experience—of liter-

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acy. "It's more than just reading and writing; any activity you do, or place you go, that builds on prior knowledge and helps children make better sense of the world counts!" David says, and he cites one program that "links literacy with photography, allowing students to tell stories through both the image and the word." Whatever program format your students choose, let their interests, creativity, and passions guide you.

Family Involvement

We have a family involvement part of our program, but participation is sporadic. How can we get more and consistent participation from parents and other family members?

Many programs face this challenge. The real question seems to be, "Why don't more families participate?" And that, our panel agrees, is not a simple question. What is the overall role of families in your program? Are parents seen as valuable partners? Do they participate as planners, advisors, or presenters?

All families have multiple demands on their time and resources. The question for them might be, "How can I possibly participate when I have to work, look after the kids, fix dinner, pay bills …." Jeri suggests asking parents "the best way to achieve greater participation. For instance, requesting information on the best day or time of a family night." Parents are more likely to be involved if they help shape the program.

Assess parents' needs and experience—in terms of both language and culture. Renee suggests incorporating language instruction into a family night for parents learning English. Volunteers could also design activities to develop parents' skills in computer literacy or job interviewing. Some parents may lack positive experiences with schools, and some may think their involvement will be viewed as interference rather than enhancement.

Offering childcare or classes is an incentive that addresses families' limited time and resources. "Incentives … differ for age levels and communities. I suggest being creative," says Jeri. Incentives sometimes give families an initial reason to attend family night. After they're in the door, they need reasons to continue participating—a welcoming and safe atmosphere, a voice in the program, and a clear sense of the benefits to their family will go a long way toward sustaining involvement. Building trust between parents and your program takes time, and it's important to convey that to tutors.

(Editors: Programs also send children home with collaborative projects for the family, schedule parent activities to coincide with other family activities at the school, or create regular celebrations with food.)

Recruitment and Selection

Last year we had difficulty maintaining a minimum number of volunteers. How can we recruit and support volunteers, especially men, so they'll remain with us at least through the year?

The reason most people don't volunteer isn't because they don't want to; they just haven't been asked. Our panel tells us that the best volunteer recruiters are other volunteers. Men, in particular, seem to get involved when they hear peers' stories, rather than when they read an ad.

If you aren't getting the response you want, reach out in other ways. Where do potential volunteers spend their time? When are they likely to respond to a call to service? In addition to civic organizations and retirement communities, look for volunteers in less obvious places. VISTA leaders from the Washington Reading Corps (WRC) have "reached out to retired teachers … tapped into sports teams, local colleges and universities, and nearby high schools," Mary explains.

It's just as important to understand the limits potential volunteers face. Mary

Once potential volunteers decide to serve, they need to be trained, supported and valued throughout their experience.

talks about one VISTA in Washington who found that the State Highway Patrol wanted to work with the tutoring program but couldn't commit individuals to specific times each week. Together, they devised a way officers could rotate through regular State Patrol slots.

Also, consider broadening your assumptions about who can tutor; half of WRC's volunteers are peer and cross-age tutors.

Once recruits materialize, screen them appropriately as required in your district before making assignments. Finding the right fit between volunteer and assignment and preparing the volunteer for service are keys to keeping members, according to Jeri. "The national service database is a great resource for recruiting people who have a desire to serve and a commitment to serving a particular community.[1]

"I also play devil's advocate in the initial interview," she adds, "to show applicants exactly what they are getting into. I encourage AmeriCorps applicants to look at other programs because they should be in a program to best meet their needs. AmeriCorps members are giving a great deal of themselves, but they also need to get something in return—good experiences and training they can take with them."

Once potential volunteers decide to serve, they need to be trained, supported, and valued throughout their experience. Providing tutors with ongoing and responsive training, a clear understanding of their role, opportunities to interact and give feedback, and recognition of their service can help volunteers become self-confident and committed.

Training

We offer quarterly training for our community volunteers but don't require attendance. How can we ensure that volunteers have the information they need to make them as comfortable and effective as possible?

Everyone on our panel agrees—all volunteers, both community and national service, should receive appropriate training before and during service. While many programs, particularly those with AmeriCorps members, require monthly or quarterly meetings, others may find it difficult to get volunteers to attend regularly, or they may not have the resources to offer follow-up training.

In that case, it's even more important to have a thorough orientation and initial training, and to give volunteers plenty of opportunities to talk with program and school staff during or after sessions. Both Renee and Jeri suggest providing volunteers who can't attend training with packets or newsletters summarizing new information and including useful resources.

Many programs tap into the experience of their staff, partners, and volunteers to provide ongoing training. Mary explains, "VISTA and AmeriCorps members in WRC receive general tutoring training and specific training in the reading curriculum used at sites. They, in turn, work with staff from the school (often a reading specialist) to provide tutor training to community volunteers."

Refresher courses at the beginning of a new year can also be beneficial, reminding long-time volunteers of the basics, updating them on new information or strategies, and allowing all volunteers to meet. Requiring attendance at trainings, Nora says "is really the best way to integrate new community volunteers with other volunteers and members. It ensures consistency in information and allows tutors to exchange best practices and troubleshoot mutual problems."

Teacher Involvement

Our school-based volunteers work primarily with a volunteer coordinator, and teachers aren't closely involved with planning. How can we better connect teachers and their classroom work with tutoring sessions?

1 In addition, Impact Online operates VolunteerMatch, an Internet database of those who want to volunteer and volunteer positions open throughout the country. The database is searchable by location, category or type of position, and date. Programs can post positions and search for volunteers for free at www.volunteermatch.org.

Our experts agree that connecting with classroom teachers and their expertise is critical to program success.

Our experts agree that connecting with classroom teachers and their expertise is critical to program success. Do teachers have a voice in your program planning or sit on the advisory board? When teachers contribute to session plans, choices about program changes, and training, volunteer skills improve (and activities connect better to classwork).

Jeri suggests a variety of ways to incorporate teachers into a tutoring program: "Ask for teacher input in the design of the program's tutoring activities." The beginning of the new year is a good time to incorporate that feedback or to revisit session designs with teachers, the volunteer coordinator, and volunteers. "Invite teachers to participate in a panel discussion during tutor team meetings. The volunteer coordinator could also participate, asking and answering questions from teachers and members.

"Teachers can also contribute to a program handbook, offering tips and tools for tutors." For teachers who want to be more involved, Jeri suggests "creating mentoring pairs or groups with members [or volunteers] and teachers."

"With a teacher-driven approach [used by many MCC sites] the classroom teacher plans tutoring activities, not the volunteer coordinator. This way," Nora explains, "children receive assistance consistent with their specific needs, and tutoring reinforces classroom learning. The role of the volunteer coordinator is to conduct a needs assessment with teachers and then match those needs to the volunteer tutors we provide."

Tutors in after-school programs can also connect with classroom teachers. Nora suggests that volunteers and teachers "send cards back and forth; the teacher writes what the child worked on that day, what went well, and suggestions for activities. It takes a lot of cooperation, but [our volunteers] find it helps give children consistent messages."

Volunteer Assignments

Some of our partners have hosted volunteers for many years, using them primarily as helpers to photocopy or assist during special events. How can we help these partners understand that our volunteers need to provide direct services to students?

Simply put, Jeri says, "tell them. There is a certain amount of preparation and paperwork in hosting members. I have found that if you're up front about program requirements, sites are more than happy to help meet program goals." Tools that can help schools and other host sites properly use volunteers should accompany those clear, consistent messages. "Design a handbook or mini-orientation for site supervisors," Jeri suggests. "Also, be specific about the time members should devote to direct service (give them a percentage or set number of hours). Design timesheets that designate time for direct service, preparation and paperwork, training, and community service. Keep track of the hours, and when they've used all of their paperwork hours, you can tell sites that the member can no longer do that type of activity." *(Editors: And consider including clearly written job descriptions or the volunteer letters of commitment up front.)*

Using a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the teacher—not just the school—is another way MCC has helped partners with the direct service dilemma. Nora has found that "it covers all the do's and don'ts of how tutors spend their time, acting as a contract between the program and teacher. It also spells out roles, responsibilities, appropriate uses of a tutor, and other information." Team leaders at MCC school sites meet individually with teachers to review the MOU. "Instead of mailing it out (do they really read it?), team leaders go over all the information—enrolling them in the program. By laying the groundwork in the beginning, we avoid the problem of tutors doing in-

Pretend the project is starting from scratch, and give it a catchy name. Use that name all the time.

appropriate work. And if a problem does come up, we can refer to the MOU."

Public Relations

We love that our volunteers and members tell others about our program, but each person seems to describe it differently. How can we get out a consistent (and compelling) message about our multifaceted program?

Julie puts this issue into perspective. "Building continuity in the organization's overall image requires that staff, volunteers, advisory board, and media learn how to talk about what you do—and talk about it in the same way. Give them the right tools to ensure the right communication outcome." Because volunteers are often a program's best promoters, Julie suggests "equipping them with three to five strategic communication points about the organization. If they work on a specific project, give them three to five points about that one project, too."

Our panel agrees, and they've offered the following ideas to help tutors spread the word about their work consistently and intelligently.

- "Create a sound-bite that answers the questions they might stumble over—So what do you do? and What is the program? Use layperson's terms (not programmatic jargon) and be brief, otherwise volunteers and members won't use it, and the public won't understand it."—*Nora*
- "Give them the terminology. Keep the description short and to the point, then print it on everything! Use it when answering the phone, during orientation, on brochures, and in meetings. Make the speech available to members and sites by using it as often as possible."—*Jeri*
- "Create something special so that volunteers identify with a unique initiative. Pretend the project is starting from scratch, and give it a catchy name. Use that name all the time. And make sure volunteers know the program's goals and their role in them."—*Gail*

The LEARNS editors have learned a great deal from this exchange with program directors around the nation. We hope you have as well, and we also encourage you to enter into the program development dialogue that is generating around the Epicenter, newly launched through the Corporation's Web site at: www.nationalservice.org/resources/epicenter.

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- **Renee Cason**
  AmeriCorps VISTA Associate
  Eastern Community Outreach
  Eastern Connecticut State Universit
  Willimantic, Connecticut
  www.ecsu.ctstate.edu

- **Julie Chapman**
  CEO
  Promoting Public Causes
  Washington, D.C.
  www.publiccauses.com

- **David Falk**
  Campus Support Coordinator
  Student Coalition for Action
  in Literacy Education (SCALE)
  University of North Carolina
  Chapel Hill, North Carolina
  www.unc.edu/depts/scale

- **Gail Killeen**
  Director
  Retired and Senior Volunteer Program
  St. Johns County School District
  St. Augustine, Florida
  www.stjohns.k12.fl.us/rsvp/index.html

- **Nora Knell**
  Student Development Director
  Montana Campus Corps
  University of Montana
  Missoula, Montana
  www.umt.edu/mtcompact/corps.htm

- **Jeri Lerwick**
  Director
  Partnerships for Student Achievement
  Forest Grove School District
  Forest Grove, Oregon
  www.fgsd.k12.or.us/americorps

- **Bridgett Stokes**
  Learn and Serve Program
  Sitka Community Schools
  Sitka, Alaska
  www.ssd.k12.ak.us

- **Mary Van Verst**
  Program Development and Evaluation
  Coordinator
  Washington Commission for National
  and Community Service
  Olympia, Washington
  www.wa.gov.80/wcncs

- **Priscilla G. Wood**
  Coordinator of America Reads
  Student Coalition for Action
  in Literacy Education (SCALE)
  University of North Carolina
  Chapel Hill, North Carolina
  www.unc.edu/depts/scale

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LEARNS at the
Northwest Regional
Educational Laboratory
101 SW Main Street,
Suite 500
Portland, OR 97204
Toll-free phone:
1-800-361-7890
Fax: (503) 275-0133
Web: www.nwrel.org
E-mail: learns@nwrel.org

Bank Street

LEARNS at the
Bank Street College
of Education
610 West 112th Street
New York, NY 10025
Toll-free phone:
1-800-930-5664
Fax: (212) 875-4547
Web: www.bnkst.edu
E-mail: learns@bnkst.edu

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